

EXPLORING RELATIONS BETWEEN EARLY AUSTRALIAN WHALERS AND SEALERS – WILLIAM RAVEN, JOHN GRONO AND THE BRISTOW BROTHERS

This paper reflects on the personal relationships that may have existed between several key figures in Australian whaling and sealing in the 1790s and early 1800s. The figures to be discussed are:

- William Raven - initially came to Australia in 1792 as master and part-owner of the convict ship *Britannia*, but while in Australia conducted several sealing voyages to the South Island of New Zealand. He returned to England in 1797 but came back to Australia in 1798-1799 in command of the armed stores ship, HMS *Buffalo*.
- John Grono - sailed with his family to Australia with William Raven as boatswain's mate in the *Buffalo* and later becoming a prominent ship-owner, ship-builder and ship master in the colony and undertaking many sealing voyages to the South Island of New Zealand and elsewhere. His wife was Elisabeth Bristow. He is my great-great grandfather. I am a direct descendant of his youngest son, Thomas.
- Abraham and Charles Caesar Bristow – well-known figures in South Seas whaling and sealing in the 1790s and early 1800s.

In a wider context, it is also interesting to reflect on the relationships that possibly existed between these merchant mariners and the prominent marine explorers of the period, including Bass and Flinders. Did they exchange useful navigational information?

William Raven

William Raven is an interesting figure in Australia's early maritime history. He was born in 1756 and entered the Royal Navy in 1779. He served as master of several naval vessels for the next seven years, including a large ship-of-the-line. He must have been a highly experienced and competent seaman to hold such a position initially at the age of 24. The master of a warship in this period was the most senior of a ship's warrant officers. He was the ship's navigator and piloted the ship in coastal waters.

In 1786, Raven left the Navy to join the booming whaling and sealing industries in Southern waters. For two years until 1788, he commanded the small vessel *Saucy Ben* that sailed for the South Seas fishery in December 1786 and returned in April 1788. In July 1788, he sailed again in a larger vessel, the *Jackall*, for the Southern Whale Fishery. Over the following three years he does at least two voyages South in the *Jackall*.

In 1792, he sailed for New South Wales as master and part-owner of the *Britannia*, 296 tons, store ship. During the next few years the *Britannia* conducted voyages to India and the Cape of Good Hope to load supplies for the new colony, as well as several sealing voyages to the South island of New Zealand. The *Britannia* returned to England in June 1797. For some of the voyage home, the *Britannia* was in company with HMS *Reliance* in which Matthew Flinders was serving. The *Reliance* had been in New South Wales for the previous two years and there can be little doubt that Flinders and Raven were well acquainted.

In December 1797, Raven returned to the Navy and took command of the *Buffalo* for passage to Australia. Initially he was rated as Master but was later commissioned as a Lieutenant. After arriving in Port Jackson in May 1799, Raven handed over command of the *Buffalo* and returned to England. He never returned to Australia and died in August 1814.

John Grono

John Grono (1767-1847) served for several years in the Royal Navy in the wars against France in the 1790s mainly in two frigates, *Venus* and *Diana*, in which he saw plenty of action. In both these ships, he was rated boatswain's mate indicating that he was an

experienced and highly regarded seaman. A boatswain's mate was a petty officer who assisted the boatswain in the rigging and sailing of the ship. He was discharged as unfit from the *Diana* in late 1795 but returned to the Navy to join the *Buffalo* in January 1798.

It is unlikely that Grono would have been in the position of boatswain's mate on the *Buffalo* (and accompanied by his family) unless he was well-known to William Raven. The *Buffalo* was a small ship with only the one commissioned officer and a crew of about 30. As boatswain's mate (sometimes he is referred to on the *Buffalo* as the Boatswain), he was effectively second in command of the ship.

John Grono left the *Buffalo* soon after arrival in Port Jackson and becomes mate (and later master) of the colonial schooner *Francis*. He settled with his family on the Hawkesbury and became a shipbuilder and master of various vessels engaged in sealing and whaling out of Sydney. He is credited with naming several features in the South Island of New Zealand, including Milford Sound, Elizabeth Island and Foveaux Strait.

Abraham and Charles Caesar Bristow

The brothers Bristow made numerous whaling voyages to the Pacific Ocean in the 1790s and early 1800s. In October 1796, Abraham (1771-1846) was line coiler in the *Speedy* in the South Seas, and in 1798-9 is listed as Master of the *Speedy*. The *Speedy* was whaling off Jervis and Bateman Bays in 1794-1796. In August 1806 he discovered the Auckland Islands off New Zealand while in command of the ship *Ocean*. Between 1802 and 1808, Charles Caesar (1774-1832) was master of the whaler *Georgia* on several lengthy whaling voyages to the Pacific Ocean. The *Georgia* was owned by Samuel Enderby and Sons, as were most other vessels mentioned above, including *Speedy*, *Ocean*, and *Jackall*.

Family history sources suggest the Bristow brothers were sons of Abraham (a Captain in the Royal Navy) and Rachel Bristow. They had a sister Elizabeth. Grono oral family history suggest that the wife of John Grono, Elizabeth Bristow's father was also Abraham Bristow and a Captain in the Royal Navy. While it is appealing to believe Elizabeth and the Bristow brothers were siblings, extensive research has shown that the Elizabeth, sister of the Bristow brothers, was not married to John Grono and lived a long life back in Britain.

Summing Up

As they were both engaged in whaling and sealing out of Port Jackson around 1795-96, Abraham Bristow and William Raven would have been well acquainted. It is also likely that John Grono and the Bristow brothers were well acquainted as all three were actively sealing or whaling around New Zealand by 1805, but whether or not there was an earlier connection through Grono's wife Elizabeth remains unproven. It is an appealing hypothesis to believe that because Raven and the Bristow clan were well-known to each other, Raven was in a position to help John Grono join the *Buffalo*.

Naval historians familiar with the culture of the Royal Navy of the period and the manning of naval vessels believe that Grono would not have been in a key position onboard the *Buffalo* unless he was well recommended, and most likely known personally to William Raven. Raven also granted indulgent passage to the Grono family. They were not listed among the 'Supernumeraries and Settlers' in *Buffalo's* ship's muster books suggesting they were onboard under a personal relationship with the captain. This all suggests a close connection between John Grono and William Raven.

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